Motivating staff to keep food safe

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Abstract
All foodservices employees are responsible for ensuring the food served in their operations is safe. However, it is the responsibility of managers and supervisors to monitor and motivate employees to consistently handle food safely.

Keywords
food safety, managers, motivation, training methods

Disciplines
Food and Beverage Management | Hospitality Administration and Management

Comments
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Motivating Staff to Keep Food Safe

All foodservices employees are responsible for ensuring the food served in their operations is safe. However, it is the responsibility of managers and supervisors to monitor and motivate employees to consistently handle food safely.

by Janell Meyer, MBA
Making time for food safety is not easy, given the other daily pressures employees and managers experience. But food safety should not be taken lightly. The numbers speak for themselves. In 2000, the USDA Economic Research Service estimated the cost from more than three million cases of foodborne illnesses from five bacterial pathogens at $6.9 billion per year. These estimates included personal medical expenses, productivity losses, and costs of premature deaths. This does not include the cost to the operations that served the unsafe food. National Restaurant Association figures show that one foodborne illness outbreak can cost an operation thousands of dollars and even result in closure.

Safe food is food that has been handled correctly from “farm to fork,” and is food that will not cause an illness in the person who consumes it. Foods that have not been handled correctly have the potential of making customers ill, especially those in high-risk populations: the elderly, infants and young children, pregnant women, and others who are ill or on medications that cause compromised immune systems.

As a foodservice operator, what are the keys to keeping food safe? Three safe food-handling practices stand out as the areas under which foodservice employees have control: preventing cross contamination, time and temperature controls, and good personal hygiene—including compliance with employee health policies. It is important for foodservice management to have standard operating procedures (SOPs) that address best practices when handling food. SOPs provide structure for an operation, and help to facilitate training and consistency in how food is handled.

Preventing Cross Contamination
By keeping raw and ready-to-eat food separate, and clean food contact surfaces away from soiled, your operation can prevent cross contamination. Cross contamination occurs when pathogens spread from an employee, work surface, or contaminated food to another food item or food contact surface. Employees should use separate equipment for different foods, prepare ready-to-eat foods before handling raw foods in the same prep area or establish different work zones, and clean and sanitize work surfaces, equipment,

(Continued on page 32)

Staff Motivational Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the Employee Says/Exhibits This...</th>
<th>Try...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I never see any of the managers washing their hands.”</td>
<td>Remembering you are a role model and sometimes the easiest way to motivate employees is by showing them how important food safety is to you through your actions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“That’s not what the other supervisor told me to do.”</td>
<td>Making sure communication from various managers and supervisors is consistent. Employees find it difficult to interpret “mixed messages.” SOPs can provide a written reference to ensure consistency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I can’t take temperatures of the foods because I can never find a thermometer around here.”</td>
<td>Providing needed resources to employees so they can successfully implement safe food practices.</td>
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<td>“We’ve always done it this way and no one has ever gotten sick.”</td>
<td>Reminding employees that most foodborne illnesses go unreported and encourage them to change their ways for the sake of the customers. Many times employees also eat the food, so keeping food safe for self-consumption may also serve as a motivator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An employee does not wash his/her hands using the recommended procedure.</td>
<td>Coaching the employee on proper handwashing procedures, and place visual reminders near the handwashing sink. It is important not to let this slide by without comment. Other employees are watching. It will send the message that proper handwashing is not important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An employee is observed consistently out of compliance with the standard operating procedure on personal hygiene.</td>
<td>Implementing the operation’s disciplinary process. If there is not a written process, consider developed procedures. Consistent actions toward employees is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An employee consistently follows safe food practices to prevent cross contamination.</td>
<td>Providing verbal praise frequently. Written performance evaluations may also include evaluation of food safety practices. Consider a food safety recognition program for employees who consistently follow safe food practices.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
and utensils after each task. Cross contamination can happen at almost any stage of food handling. Vigilance is required for the entire flow of food—from the back door to the customer.

Avoiding Time and Temperature Abuse

Time and temperature abuse can also occur anywhere within the flow of food through the foodservice operation. Keeping cold foods cold (below 41°F) and hot foods hot (above 135°F) is a good start. Using calibrated thermometers to accurately check temperatures and then recording these temperatures at specified times in the food flow is an excellent standard operating procedure. This gives you the knowledge and documentation that cooked foods have reached the required safe end-point cooking temperature, leftovers have cooled and been reheated in the required time frame, and all food has been stored at safe temperatures.

Ensuring Proper Personal Hygiene

Poor personal hygiene by food handlers is often the cause of foodborne illness outbreaks. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) January 2011 report estimates that 58 percent of foodborne illnesses are caused by norovirus. Often norovirus is transmitted to food through food handlers with poor hand hygiene. Food handlers’ personal hygiene consists of: hand practices—including handwashing, glove use and bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat food; personal cleanliness; and clothing, including hair restraints and jewelry.

Besides having personal hygiene policies in place, training employees about these policies and monitoring them in your foodservice operation, it is important as a manager or supervisor to always model good personal hygiene habits. Handwashing is the most important part of personal hygiene. Encouraging and modeling proper handwashing procedures and frequency is a powerful managerial tool. This can demonstrate to employees that handwashing is critical.

Good personal hygiene is much more difficult when an employee is ill. Having a set policy that conforms to state regulation and encourages employees not to come to work ill is good practice. Having a back-up plan in place to cover for ill employees is also important.

I know the keys to good food safety practices, but how am I supposed to get all of that done?

It starts with making food safety a priority in your operation. Consider the risks of not making it a priority. A foodborne illness can be a life-or-death situation for certain populations. How many people are you willing to make sick? Financially, is your operation capable of closing down for several days or weeks and dealing with possible lawsuits? Most institutions rely on their food services for all or most of their food needs. How will clientele be nourished if your operation is closed down during a foodborne illness outbreak investigation? Thoughtfully weighing these considerations and risks should bring even the most financially concerned top management to this realization: Food safety is a priority goal.
Plenty of challenges exist for managers and supervisors. They can get in the way of consistent safe food practices. The employee turnover rate in many operations makes it seem cost-prohibitive to offer thorough food safety training, let alone ongoing training. When you are able to offer training, is it in the best form for the employee to learn and put into practice? The current workforce is very diverse—culturally, educationally, and generationally. The “one size fits all” approach to food safety training is rarely effective for all employees.

If only you had the time and resources available to you to individualize your food safety training for each employee. Besides offering them the knowledge needed, what really motivates each employee to handle food safely? Are they motivated internally by such things as getting personal satisfaction from knowing they have done a good job, or by knowing they plan to eat the food, too, and don’t want to get sick? Are they motivated by external forces like the supervisor telling them they have done a good job handwashing today or a manager giving them a Safe Food Employee of the Month award?

What motivates your employees to handle food safely?

Knowing what motivates your employees and what they see as barriers to safe food handling can be very helpful when providing training, as well as monitoring needed to ensure the food served in your operation is safe. See the Staff Motivational Strategies chart provided with this article.

Employees are the “last line of defense” and can potentially prevent or cause a foodborne illness. Supervisors and managers can remove barriers and help motivate employees to follow safe food handling practices. By communicating consistent messages to employees, providing needed resources such as training, offering rewards and discipline if needed, supervisors and managers can motivate employees.

It’s also important to recognize that some employees are motivated internally—it just makes them feel good to do their job well and this includes following safe food practices. Usually employees are both internally (self) motivated as well as motivated by external interactions. Managing with this understanding of your workforce can help operations consistently provide safe food.

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Resources for Dietary Managers

One of the outcomes from a recent project at Iowa State University was the development of training modules for supervisors and managers. These training modules are intended to help supervisors and managers motivate employees to follow safe food handling practices. Free modules can be found at: http://www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsafety/toolkit/

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